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BREAKING THE BARRIERS: AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL REFORM IN 'KAMINEE'

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Abstract

In this paper, the play "Kaminee" written anonymously in 1874 is analyzed from a social reform perspective. The play tells the story of Kaminee, who becomes a widow at a young age and is forced to live a perpetual widowhood due to her father's traditional beliefs. The play ends with Kaminee leaving home, hinting at her interest in Christianity. The study explores Kaminee's journey of breaking societal barriers and achieving freedom from orthodox beliefs. It also sheds light on the playwright's intention of advocating for social reform, particularly in the context of the issue of 'widow remarriage'.

Introduction

This paper delves into the response of the anonymous playwright behind the 1874 publication of "Kaminee" to significant societal issues prevalent during the pre-independence era, specifically addressing perpetual widowhood and patriarchy. The play offers unique and illuminating perspectives on these complex social dilemmas. This paper examines the portrayal of women contending with the inflexibility of societal norms in the pre-independent era, with a focus on the central character—a young virgin widow in "Kaminee" who challenges prevailing oppressive social conventions. The play captures a personal rebellion as the young widow defies her orthodox father's superstitious beliefs and leaves her home. Through her actions, Kaminee breaks societal barriers and challenges the stereotypes of her time. This inquiry seeks to uncover how the play aligns with socio-religious movements of that era and continues to serve as a source of inspiration and insight for contemporary discussions on social reform.

Methodology of Research

The selected approach for research is of a qualitative nature, integrating textual analysis. The targeted text will undergo an in-depth examination and evaluation within the historical and cultural context of Bengal society in the 19th century. The primary source for this study is the recently restored play "Kaminee," authored anonymously, and compiled by Professor Anand Lal. Additional references utilized in this research are secondary sources.

Historical Context and Publication History:

Throughout the annals of history, movements with a socio-religious thrust have championed alterations in social conduct, sparking conflicts between those upholding the prevailing order and those advocating for a rebellion against entrenched cultural norms. This tension came to the fore during the East India Company's campaign to civilize Indians, notably with the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 becoming a focal point of discussion in literary and

theatrical circles a couple of decades after its enactment. The resistance from orthodox elements led to conversions to Christianity and the documented suicides of young girls. Against this backdrop, the play "Kaminee-The Virgin Widow" emerged in 1874.

Recently scrutinized by Professor Anand Lal, this play was procured from the British Library, London, and featured in his publication "Indian Drama in English: The Beginnings" (2019). Professor Anand Lal, employing an investigative research approach, sought to unearth the actual authorship of the play. Despite indicators pointing to G. Ritchie in the Bengal Library Catalogue, with proprietor J. Belmont Gomes, clarity regarding whether it was a pseudonym or the actual author remained elusive. Confronting challenges in author identification, Professor Anand Lal shifted focus to the Indian Mirror, the play's publication platform, associated with the Brahma Samaj. Lal postulated that someone from the Indian Mirror might be the authentic author of Kaminee. He surmised that the association with the Indian Mirror provides "all the more reason to consider Kaminee as Indian drama, whether written pseudonymously, solely by Ritchie, a British national, or Laurence, or co-written by either one and an Indian" (Lal, 200). In essence, Kaminee surfaces as a distinctly Indian play addressing prevailing social issues, its publication by the Indian Mirror affirming its classification, despite the persisting mystery surrounding the author's identity.

Grasping the play's essence and thematic significance necessitates an understanding of the historical backdrop. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, propelled by figures like Eshwara Chandra Vidyasagar, gained traction among progressive Hindus and liberals advocating for 'Widow Remarriage.' Plays such as "Bidhaba Bibaha" contributed to this discourse. Anand Lal's observations hint at the play drawing inspiration from the life of Gunesh Soondery Dabee Sen, a young widow who embraced Christianity under the guidance of her zenana teacher. In essence, the play responds to societal deliberations surrounding 'Widow Remarriage.' Our exploration delves into the social realities depicted, aiming to fathom the

playwright's perspective on the issue and scrutinize potential solutions or opinions presented.

Discussion

In the words of Kenneth W. Jones, "A socio-religious movement involves advocating for changes in social conduct, legitimizing such advocacy through some form of religious authority, and subsequently constructing an organizational framework sustained over time" (Jones Kenneth.W, 2). A socio-religious reform movement represents a collective initiative aiming to induce alterations in social behavior by challenging and resisting established societal norms, customs, and convictions within a specific religious context. These movements often face opposition and objections from adherents of existing religious beliefs, encountering dissent during their initial stages. The central objective of such movements is to renovate and reshape societal practices considered obsolete or inequitable, driven by a commitment to instigate positive transformations in how individuals and communities engage within the realms of their religious and social associations. With this comprehension, this paper delves into the examination of the play "Kaminee –The Virgin Widow."

The play "Kaminee - The Virgin Widow" unfolds around Kaminee, a 15-year-old labeled as a 'virgin widow,' navigating perpetual widowhood due to her orthodox father, Kistodhone. Characters are intricately organized into four groups, including orthodox Hindus, liberal and educated young Hindus, progressive and reformed Hindus, and Christian characters. The play explores societal challenges faced by young Hindu widows and delves into discussions on widow remarriage, challenging norms. The narrative unfolds through acts, each revealing complexities of societal norms, individual choices, and the impact of religion. From a medical college lecture to a drawing room discussion, the characters engage in thought-provoking dialogues, highlighting the struggles of widows and advocating for societal reform. The play's climax involves Kaminee's escape from her oppressive home, seeking refuge with a Christian relative, signaling hope for the eradication of perpetual widowhood customs.

The drama unfolds across five acts, presenting characters arranged into four distinct groups. The initial group embodies orthodox Hindus, prominently showcasing Kistodhone, the father of the virgin widow, and Peary Mohun. Conversely, the second group comprises liberal and educated young Hindus, including Banee Madhob, Madhob Chunder, and Chunder Mohan. The narrative takes a fascinating turn with the third group, consisting of progressive and reformed Hindus, where Doyal Chhunder Seal and Sibnarayan Banerjee prominently feature. Banerjee's unconventional choices challenge the norms of caste Hindu families. The narrative further diversifies with the fourth group, illustrating Christian characters such as Harry Wilton and Alice Thornhill, infusing distinctive dimensions into the storyline. Rev. Shama Churn Mookerjee's embrace of Christianity adds another layer of complexity. Prankissen Sen, a solicitor of the High Court, and the girls' group, featuring Kaminee alongside her two cousins, bring the ensemble to completion. The purposeful arrangement of characters underscores the playwright's endeavor to craft a multifaceted narrative.

The play's opening act unfolds in the lecture theatre of the medical college, where Banee, Mahdob, and Chunder engage in a thought-provoking dialogue addressing the challenges faced by young Hindu widows. The conversation takes an emotional turn with Banee criticizing Peary for lack of substance and delves into the poignant story of Gunesh Soondery Devi, a widow who defied norms by converting to Christianity. Chunder passionately advocates for societal reform, emphasizing the need for the acceptance of widow remarriage within Hindu society. Act Two shifts to Sibnarain Banerjee's drawing room, where cousins Kaminee, Komolinee, and Phool Coomari eagerly await their zenana-teacher, Alice. The dialogue explores Chunder's attempts to win Kaminee's favor and unveils the tragic tale of Parbutte, casting a somber tone. Mr. Wilton's entrance charged the atmosphere, leading to Alice's abrupt departure and revealing complex dynamics, including her impending marriage to Wilton. The third act unfolds in Sibnarain Banerjee's mansion-house, with Kaminee expressing despair over her education constraints due to perpetual

widowhood. Wilton critiques Hinduism, intensifying the discourse with Mahdob highlighting various sects within Christianity. Act Four, set in Kistodone Banerjee's sitting room, centers on religious discussions and Doyal's proposal of a marriage between Chund and Kaminee, rejected by Kistodone. Peary encounters Kaminee, inquiring about her search for Mr. Wilton, revealing her preference for another if her father approves. The final act at Dalhousie Square in moonlight features Alice and Wilton expressing reluctance to marry an Indian girl. Komolinee, Phool Coomaree, and Chunder join, revealing Kaminee's escape after her father's prohibition. Progressive Hindu Beharry informs that Kaminee is safe with her relative Rev. Sham Churn Mookerjee, a Christian. Discussions hint at Kaminee eventually embracing Christianity, concluding the play with hope for reformers to eliminate perpetual widowhood customs among Hindus.

The dramatist adeptly maneuvers through the complex clash that plays out among three unique factions in the community. Initially, the traditionalists stand firm in their commitment to religious superstitions. Subsequently, the progressive's surface, vehemently challenging these backward customs and pushing for essential changes. Alongside them, the Forward-thinking Hindus adopt a position not against religion itself but against the harmful practices woven into it, and a faction supportive of Christianity also adds layers to the narrative. "Kaminee" stands out as a potent societal satire, echoing a reformist spirit that scrutinizes and questions established conventions.

The central figure, Kaminee, designated a virgin widow at the age of fifteen, takes center stage in this societal evaluation. Imposing a lifetime of widowhood on such a young girl, burdened with psychological constraints, is considered disastrous according to societal norms.

Kaminee's father, Kistodone, becomes a symbol of patriarchal dominance, utilizing religion as a tool to inflict suffering on his own daughter. In an era where widowhood is unfortunately accepted as commonplace, Kistodone, depicted as an obstinate and callous figure, represents how deeply patriarchy

and orthodoxy can blind an individual to the suffering of their own kin. This impactful portrayal is vividly demonstrated in the enlightening exchange between Doyal and Kistodone in Act IV, uncovering the extent to which patriarchal and orthodox convictions overshadow familial understanding and empathy.

“DOYAL: I am surprised that you should be so strong in your prejudice, as I find your younger brother, Baboo Sibnarain, is a thoroughly reformed man. He has no objection to educate his daughters in English by Christian people, and has not yet got them married according to Hindoo custom, although one is over 18 years of age, and the other 17; and if I mistake not, even your daughter Kaminee, known as the virgin widow, is frequently among them.

KISTODONE: I suffered Kaminee to go to her cousins just to pick up a little English and music; especially as she seemed to be very fond of the latter, and had made considerable progress in the former before the death of her husband.

DOYAL: I don't wish to stand forward as a fault-finder; but I don't think a young widow like Kaminee has anything to do the prescriptive and ancient usages of Hindoo Society. But since you have been so liberal in your conduct towards your child- and I commend you sincerely for it-I have a proposition to make in respect of (sic) her.

KISTODONE: What proposition? Have you discovered anything wrong in her virtue? By Kally! She shall be expelled from my domicile at once.”(Lal,232)

The last statement vividly illustrates Kistodone's unwavering dedication to preserving patriarchal honor, to the point of considering the expulsion of his own daughter from their family home. This steadfast allegiance to societal conventions establishes the groundwork for ensuing dialogues between Doyal, a progressive Brahman, and Kistodone.

As the storyline unfolds, Doyal, embodying a forward-thinking perspective, boldly presents the radical concept of arranging Kaminee's remarriage with Chunder. However, Kistodone vehemently expresses disapproval of this idea, underscoring his unwavering commitment to conventional values. His responses in the ensuing conversation underscore the extent of his inflexibility, allowing no space for compromise regarding the sanctity of established norms. The exchange between Doyal and Kistodone evolves into a battleground of ideologies, where progressive thinking clashes with deeply entrenched traditional beliefs. This pivotal juncture in the play mirrors the societal tensions and ideological conflicts that permeate the backdrop of "Kaminee."

“KISTODONE: That is impossible; noble or ignoble, I will listen to no such foolish overtures. I hope he does not wish to insult me. Does he imagine this proposed alliance can seduce me to to abandon the religion of my forefathers?

DOYAL: I do not think there is any disgrace attaching to such a course. On the contrary, you will confer a great blessing on your daughter, promote the happiness of my friend Chunder, and be held up as praise worthy example to posterity.

KISTODONE: Nothing will tempt me to change my resolution. I would rather see her die. I must prevent her visits to her cousins at once.

DOYAL: There is no occasion for it. Chunder seldom visits your brother's house; but I wish you to consider the misery and wretchedness you entail upon your child by your cruel determination.

KISTODONE: This is what our religion requires.” (Lal, p.233)

Hence, it is clear that the traditionalists utilize religious practices to suppress women, limit independent thinking, and sustain gender inequality. To preserve the current societal structure, fabricated beliefs were integrated into religious customs, vehemently opposing any suggestions of change. The dramatist skillfully

illustrates how religious doctrines were manipulated by the orthodox to maintain the existing state of a superstitious community. This exchange involving Kistodone provides a compelling glimpse into the prevalent exploitation of religion during that time: "Hindooism is constructed on a foundation which no amount of missionary preachment, no pulpit oratory, nor the denunciations of bubbling patriots can shake" (p.229).

In this scenario, the challenges faced by widows become apparent as they endure their suffering in silence, fearing the harsh consequences from society if they challenge the imposed constraints. The play illustrates Kaminee's responses, mirroring her despair and doubt regarding any potential change in her life as a widow. She views the concept of remarriage as unfamiliar, a sentiment ingrained by societal stereotypes that render independent and progressive thoughts seemingly foreign to those undergoing the anguish of widowhood.

Wilton's encouragement for Kaminee to excel in music, as portrayed in Act-III, is met with a response steeped in despondency. She expresses, "According to the dogmas of our religion, and the ruling of our gurus, I must pine in perpetual widowhood, having lost my husband when young, so what avails my acquirements, or success in studies?" (pp. 222-223). This underscores the profound impact of societal norms, rendering personal achievements futile in the face of inflexible traditions.

Kaminee's view of the concept of widow marriage as unconventional is evident in her interactions. When questioned by her Zenana teacher, Alice, about her father's stance on her remarriage in Act-II, Kaminee responds, "Oh! He will not listen to any such unfamiliar propositions." (218) This perspective is echoed in Act-IV, where Peary suggests the idea of her marrying Wilton, and she incredulously asks, "What made such an unexpected idea enter your mind? Are young widows ever allowed to marry?" (235) These conversations effectively convey the ingrained societal norms that discourage widows from considering a life beyond perpetual widowhood.

The perpetuation of these deeply rooted stereotypes is evident in characters like Peary, while figures such as Wilton align themselves with Christianity. These supporting roles emphasize the underlying animosity between religious fundamentalists in 19th-century India. In Act-IV, Peary uses puns to mock Indian liberals, ridiculing individuals like 'Chatterjee' as a 'chattering donkey,' 'Raghunath' as 'Rogue-o-nauth,' and 'Raj-kisto' as 'Raj-Kiss-toe' (230). Additionally, in Act-III, Peary informs Kaminee of Wilton's marriage to 'Alice, one of his own race' (235). In the following act, Wilton, an Englishman, expresses hesitation about marrying an Indian woman, questioning, "Could anyone, not absolutely a maniac, ever prefer a raw Indian girl to one so accomplished and charming as yourself?" (236). Consequently, the playwright perceptively unveils the double standards of the English and their civilizing mission through conversions. This is juxtaposed with the endeavors of Indian orthodox individuals striving to uphold existing societal norms, resisting reformers and Indian reform movements.

Simultaneously, liberal perspectives echo in the narrative through figures such as Alice, Doyal, Chunder, Beharry, and Mahdob. Serving as the zenana teacher for the three cousins Phool Coomari, Komolinee, and Kaminee, Alice consistently conveys her empathy—a trait often associated with European reactions to Indian concerns of that time. She narrates the tragic story of Parbuttee, a virgin widow, drawing connections between her plight and the circumstances of Kaminee and her father. In her own expressions:

"You have probably not heard of a melancholy episode in the life of Parbuttee, who like Kaminee, was a virgin widow of fourteen. Her father was as relentless as Baboo Kistodone Banerjee. He received an overture from a respectable Koolin for an honorable alliance with his daughter, but he rejected it with indignation. He was a Hindoo of the old school, and he vowed by Doorgah, and the three hundred and thirty millions of gods they worship, that he would rather seeher a corpse than think of marrying her a second time to anyone....." "The tradition of our

forefathers," said he, 'must be observed in all their rigid integrity, whatever the Inglified dram-drinking Young Bengals may think of them.' The poor girl committed suicide at last!" (218)

Another character, Chunder, articulates the hardships confronted by Hindu widows: "The wretched condition of Hindu widows is a colossal evil... The splendid eloquence of our supposed patriots and moral reformers is a mere sham." (214)

He further explores a topic resonating with the playwright's perspective on the conditions of that era: "The wretched fate to which our society remorsefully consigns the widow is one of the worst features of our national religion. We do not ignore the difficulties which surround the task of emancipating our females from their thralldom, but, surely the indifference and apathy displayed by our brethren in the matter to be deserved to be denounced by loudest anathemas." (215)

As Chunder expresses the ambitions of forward-thinking individuals in society to eliminate the tradition of perpetual widowhood, Doyal, another character, consistently champions the progressive ideology of liberals. For example, he remarks, "You ought to know that reforms and radical changes cannot be effected in a day. To eliminate truth from decaying creeds must be the work of time." (228) In doing so, the playwright reveals a desire for reform and aims to uncover the emptiness and ignorance of the orthodox. He supports reformers, asserting, "Although the orthodox folks of the old school, sunk as it were, in medieval ignorance, unjustly malign them, and impugn their disinterested motives, they have received the smile and the encouragement of all enlightened and reformed Hindus, and the approbation of European gentlemen." (229)

In the final act, an important revelation takes place as Kaminee, forbidden by her father to visit her cousin's house, takes a courageous step by departing from her father's residence. In a touching dialogue with Alice, Phool Coomarie observes, "Uncle has brought on all these troubles and disgrace by his deep-rooted prejudice and obstinate determination." (238) This signifies a pivotal

juncture, eliciting empathy from the audience towards Kaminee's persona, disrupting the conventions of a society firmly rooted in traditional convictions.

In the ultimate act, Kaminee, absent from the stage, communicates eloquently through her choices. Seeking sanctuary in Rev. Mookerjee's abode, she hesitates to revisit her father's residence. A diplomatic resolution unfolds as her resolute father consents to an accord with Mookerjee's family. This agreement permits Kaminee periodic visits with the stipulation of refraining from interactions with unfamiliar men. The evolution in her father's perspective directly emanates from Kaminee's courageous resolve—a sharp departure from the lamentable destiny of the virgin widow Parbuttee, who opted for tragedy through suicide.

Findings

Through the depiction of Kaminee, the dramatist effectively communicated a compelling message, advocating for the breakdown of entrenched societal barriers as a prerequisite for comprehensive reform. The central dilemma centered on the enduring prevalence of perpetual widowhood, an issue perpetuated without justification under the cloak of tradition and religious adherence. The theatrical narrative accentuated the pressing necessity to reshape the ingrained perceptions of widows, fostering an environment where they could defy preconceived societal norms. In turn, the dramatist championed a collaborative endeavor involving reformers, liberals, and individuals with progressive inclinations, rallying them against this pervasive social injustice. The plea was for a synergistic partnership that could instigate transformative shifts within society, embracing a more compassionate and humanistic ethos. In summary, the dramatist's findings underscored the critical urgency of challenging and reshaping societal norms through collective unity and empathetic comprehension.

Conclusion

The dramatist subtly implies the imperative need for reform to dismantle the confines imposed on women, paving the way for societal

advancement. The play culminates with a resounding call to action, urging reformers to unite in abolishing entrenched social maladies, particularly perpetual widowhood among children. It champions the recognition of women's dignity by dismantling patriarchal constraints veiled under the guise of tradition and religion. This sentiment finds poignant expression in the concluding lines voiced by Beharry: "The zealous reformers and reconstructors of Hindoo society, the pioneers of civilization and benefactors of the race, should unite together—for in union is strength—to extirpate this hydra-headed evil from our community." (243) These resonant expressions mirror the definition of Socio-religious reform movement by Kenneth, elucidated at the outset of this discourse.

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